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TEACHING FRESHMEN TO SPELL

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One year ago a New York daily paper printed a dispatch of which the following is an approximate copy:

Not one of a class of twenty-five University of —— rhetoric students could spell all these words correctly: accommodate, dissipate, disappoint, laboratory, embarrassment, athletics, lose, courtesy, professor, stopped, precede, harass, companies, equipped, development, occurred, interfered, inferred, noticeable, lovable, Thackeray, Macaulay, proceed, acknowledgment, permissible.

Only thirteen made a passing grade, and the grades ranged from 44 to 96. Out of 625 words 441 were misspelled. Nineteen could not spell "Macaulay."

The test was then put to an advanced class of Juniors and Seniors, but only one out of seven could spell all the words.

Is it impossible to teach spelling?

When the periodic complaint arises from the colleges that Freshmen cannot spell, it is fair to ask how such a thing is possible. The College Entrance Examination Board explicitly states that "however accurate in subject-matter, no paper will be considered satisfactory if seriously defective in spelling." The college catalogues are equally emphatic that none who cannot spell need hope to enter. Typical are the following statements: "No student will be passed . . . whose work shows serious weakness in spelling" (Catalogue of the University of Wisconsin); "The spelling, punctuation, and capitalizing must be correct" (Catalogue of the University of Michigan).

If the college insists that the candidate shall have acquired the ability to spell, and if the entrance examination tests this ability adequately, the conclusion is certain that there is no such creature as a Freshman who cannot spell. But if the college examiners do not hold correct spelling in quite so high esteem as do the catalogues, if they condone bad spelling in bluebooks which "show ability," if there is no fairly fixed and constant measure of what

constitutes bad spelling, then in due course the candidate, and possibly also his school instructor, will shape his action accordingly. Colleges have with complete justice demanded that schools shall teach boys and girls to spell. Schools, on their part, have with equal justice the right to demand that the colleges shall uphold them in the task which they are willing and able to perform.

It is not the purpose of this paper to condone or excuse the shortcomings of schools in the teaching of spelling, but to suggest how that training in spelling during the two last years in preparatory school or high school may be made efficient. For the boy who is going, not into college, but into business has even greater need of internal spelling-resources. It is unfortunately true that a student often comes solidly up against the necessity of correct spelling for the first time when he writes a letter of application for a position. How can such students be given the power to spell the words they need to use, and also the internal spelling-resources to meet new conditions and needs? Or, in other words, how can we train boys and girls during their last two years at preparatory or high school so that they may meet with confidence and certainty the requirements of college or the world of affairs?

It is not, in the main, a question of presenting new words with their pronunciation and meaning. The average age of students entering college is eighteen—an age at which new words are invading their vocabularies from many collateral studies and activities. It is the problem of discovering what words in the common vocabulary of a boy or girl of seventeen to eighteen are most frequently misspelled, and of determining the most effective means of fixing these forms permanently in the mind.

One of Rice's conclusions from his investigation of the teaching of spelling was that the proper spelling-text should contain 6,000-7,000 words. The average written vocabulary of a boy of seventeen to eighteen includes not more than 3,000 words. Dr. W. Franklin Jones, in his valuable investigation of the material of English spelling, showed that 1,050 students of the second to the eighth grade of schools in Illinois, Maryland, Iowa, and South Dakota possessed a joint total vocabulary of 4,532 words. The average vocabulary of children in the second grade was 521 words,

and the average vocabulary of students in the eighth grade was 2,135 words. The yearly increment to the child's vocabulary was greatest between the eighth and the ninth year of the child's age. This increment showed a small but fairly constant annual decrease to the age of fourteen. Dr. Jones's study showed that a student misspelled on the average only 48 of the words in his vocabulary. This conclusion is corroborated by the study of boys of seventeen to eighteen. The average number of misspelled words in a year's written work of 64 boys was 39 and the greatest number of misspellings was 82. And yet some of us still inflict upon a student of seventeen to eighteen, who can already spell the vast majority of the 3,000 words at his command, a daily lesson from a spelling-book containing 6,000 different words! Methods of enlarging the student's vocabulary are aside from the question at issue, which is to teach boys to spell the words already in their vocabulary. A large part of the problem is solved the moment we know what words in the vocabularies of students of a certain age are most frequently misspelled.

MATERIAL

In order to arrive at this knowledge, the carefully preserved records of words misspelled in actual compositions written in class for the past fifteen years at the Hill School have been collated and examined. The compositions written were on subjects taken from the student's experience, from his general knowledge, and from his reading in literature. The digested records give the most frequent misspellings in some 10,000,000 words of the ordinary vocabularies of some 1,100 boys of the average age of seventeen to eighteen in this school. These were arranged in order of frequency of occurrence. It was found that 900 words exhausted the frequent misspellings.

This list of 900 words has been compared with the list of 4,532 words which occur in the joint vocabularies of the 1,050 grade-school students investigated by Dr. Jones. The purpose of this comparison was to determine how many of the words belonging to the vocabularies of children of seven to thirteen are still misspelled by boys of seventeen to eighteen. The result of this comparison may be given in the form of a table. Opposite each

grade is placed a percentage, which represents the proportion of the 900 misspellings common with boys of seventeen to eighteen, found in the vocabulary of that grade.

	Percent
Second grade (not over eight years of age)	14.4
Third grade (not over nine years of age)	18.7
Fourth grade (not over ten years of age)	24.0
Fifth grade (not over eleven years of age)	29.5
Sixth grade (not over twelve years of age)	36.9
Seventh grade (not over thirteen years of age)	43.0
Eighth grade (not over fourteen years of age)	50.7

Now the significance of this comparison lies in this fact—that it shows that about 50 per cent of the most commonly misspelled words of boys of seventeen to eighteen *do not exist at all* in the vocabularies of students of eight to fourteen. Again, Dr. Jones prints a list of “One Hundred Spelling Demons of the English Language.” Forty-seven per cent of this list has vanished from the demonology in the swift passing of four years! Another conclusion drawn by Dr. Jones from his very useful investigation was the following: “The words having the distinction of being the most frequently misspelled three words are ‘which,’ ‘there,’ and ‘their.’ These words are apparently the arch-demons of English spelling.” True of children below the age of fourteen, the conclusion is quite untrue of boys of seventeen to eighteen. “Which” has entirely disappeared from the trouble-making words; and 170 words are now more frequently misspelled than either “there” or “their.”

The conclusions to be drawn from this comparison are clear. If we are to teach spelling efficiently and economically, we must teach it from texts carefully adapted to the needs of the students under our care, as determined by the vocabularies which they actually use.

Three years ago this list of words was made the foundation of the spelling-instruction for our boys of the age of seventeen to eighteen. As a concrete test of its relative efficiency the list of words printed at the beginning of this article was, without warning or preparation, given to the whole class of 64 boys. These students, it should be said, unlike the university students to whom the test was originally given, had no specific reason for knowing the two

proper names (Thackeray, Macaulay) included in the list; nevertheless the complete list was given as it stands. The results of the test were as follows: Four of the 64 spelled all the words correctly. No student failed to attain the passing grade of the College Entrance Examination Board, and the average of the whole class was a fraction below 82 per cent. It should be added that all the words (with the exception of the proper names) occur in our list of 900 words, but only 3 of the 25 are among the 50 most commonly misspelled by boys of seventeen to eighteen.

While the conditions under which spelling is taught in different schools vary within wide limits, it may be suggestive to indicate the means that have been found most efficacious in teaching thoroughly the forms of these 900 words.

METHOD

1. The investigations of Rice and Cornman brought the so-called spelling-drill into discredit with many teachers who did not perhaps observe that the whole weight of the argument was against *a certain kind* of drill. Dr. Wallin, on the other hand, has shown what good results were obtained in the Cleveland schools from drills which retained the students' attention. How are we, indeed, to attain to the automatic association of certain visual signs with certain sounds except by practice and drill? The 900 words referred to are not new to the users; their meaning and their pronunciation (with few exceptions) are familiar, for they are already in the boys' vocabulary. It is the *form* which must be fixed, and this can be done only by constantly repeated, attentive effort—drill of an intelligent sort. In practice 25 words are studied for each of the three weekly English recitations. The entire list is thus covered three times during the school year. Not more than six minutes of each recitation (i.e., eighteen minutes a week) is devoted to question, examination, or comment on the spelling-lesson of the day.

2. From boys' testimony taken at various times in the last three years it is evident that only four spelling-rules are of any actual practical value. Of these the two used most frequently by the student are, first, the rule for doubling the final consonant before a suffix, and second, the rule for *ie*, *ei*. It will be noticed that 4 of the 25 words in the test group given above are solved by

the application of the first of these rules, a rule which will fail a student very seldom. It has therefore been insisted that boys shall absolutely know and be able to apply at any time the four most useful spelling-rules, which would in themselves spell 7 of the 25 words in the test list.

3. But anyone who has examined college-entrance examination papers in English knows that a large number of the words misspelled (from the writer's observation more than 20 per cent) find their place in no speller that ever was or will be. This is because they are mistakes either in the form of the possessive case or in the compounding of words. It has been our practice, therefore, to deal with these errors *en bloc*, to make sure that students understand the principle of word-compounding and of the possessive case; and, more important, to give them constant practice in the application of these principles.

4. It must be remembered that in teaching the proper material for our students—in this case the given 900 words—we are not teaching *de novo*, but we have first to destroy bad habits, and then to form good ones. Time and patience, then, are all-important. The essence of good corrective work is individual teaching. Indeed, it is not enough to determine what words are, on the average, most frequently misspelled by students of a certain age. We must determine the words progressively misspelled by each student. The ideal spelling-book has never been compiled, and never will be, for it is an *individual* spelling-book. To attain this end, students are required to keep a record of their misspellings, enter them at stated times in individual record-books kept by the instructor, and twice a year to confer with him over these words. At that time particularly the teacher can diagnose special cases of failure, due sometimes to defective vision, poor auditory memory, or plain inability to read aloud.

5. The whole problem of spelling in the last two years of preparatory or high school is complicated by the fact that among our students we have some 8 or 10 per cent of what have been termed "constitutional" bad spellers—students who have somehow progressed without eradication of their difficulties. It is sometimes found that a boy who is a "chronic bad speller" in English has no such difficulty in French or Latin. Such a case can usually be

accounted for by faulty training in earlier years. Lay and Pohlman have made it probable that during the earlier years spelling should be taught by combined appeal to motor memory (articulatory and graphic), together with visual and auditory; and that the visual memory improves as the child approaches maturity, and finally becomes the chief resource of the adult. Boys who have been badly trained in spelling in their early years begin Latin when visual memory is stronger, and so have less difficulty with it than with their English, in which bad habits have first to be eradicated. In practice these "chronic bad spellers" are segregated with others in a "special spelling class" which meets for not more than ten minutes, five times a week, for special drill. W. W. Charters has already shown the excellent results to be obtained from a "spelling hospital." In this special spelling class there are always the 50 or 60 boys who, at the time, are the worst spellers of the 360 students. Such a hospital is essential in every school.

For, after all, the main cause of bad spelling is *plain carelessness*. Make a boy see that it is necessary for him to learn to spell, oblige him to make a friend of the dictionary, and he will learn. Students are frequently excused from the special spelling class after two weeks on the score of a perfect record, and go out of it with a new sense of the importance of the correct form of the words they write. "Impossible to teach spelling?" Not at all. The most stubborn cases of "inability to spell" will yield to intelligent, persistent effort; but it must be the combined effort of master and boy.

The titles of the articles referred to are:

- J. M. Rice. "The Futility of the Spelling Grind," *Forum*, XXIII (1897), 163 ff., 409 ff.
- W. W. Charters. "'The Spelling Hospital,' in the High School," *School Review*, XVIII (1910), 192 ff.
- J. E. Wallace Wallin, Ph.D. "Has the Drill Become Obsolescent?" *Journal of Educational Psychology*, I (1910), 200 ff.
- W. A. Lay. *Experimentelle Didaktik*, 3d ed., 1910.
- Pohlman. *Experimentelle Beiträge zur Lehre vom Gedächtniss*, 1905.
- W. Franklin Jones, Ph.D. *Concrete Investigation of the Material of English Spelling*. Published by the University of South Dakota, November, 1913.
- O. P. Cornman. *Spelling in the Elementary School*, 1902.
- W. A. Cook and M. V. O'Shea, *The Child and His Spelling*.